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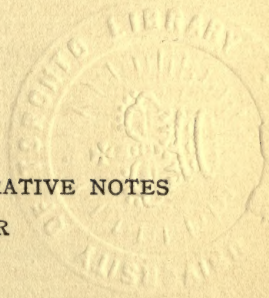
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CHARLES DICKENS

BY

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

WITH PREFACE AND ILLUSTRATIVE NOTES

BY THE EDITOR



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ADVERTISEMENT

THIS little book is made up of two separate essays. One of them appeared in the 'Quarterly Review' of July 1902. For the right of reprinting it thanks are due to the courtesy of Mr. John Murray. The other is an essay upon 'Oliver Twist,' which novel the 'Quarterly' article left undiscussed because Swinburne had already said what he wanted to say upon the subject in another quarter. It now finds the proper place in this book—and finds it without the change of a single word. With regard to the essay on 'Oliver Twist' the editor is indebted to Mr. George D. Sproul of New York for his permission to include it in the volume. To him the copyright both in England and the United States belongs as publisher of the large American édition de luxe of Dickens's works now in course of issue.

With regard to the 'Quarterly' article,

Swinburne, with the fixed intention of republishing it, began to add, some time before his death, certain marginalia to a copy of the review in his library. These marginalia will be found here on pages 64 and 68. The first of them, as will be seen, is a side blow aimed at the disciples of Ibsen, with whom to the last Swinburne remained at war. The second, which institutes a comparison between the realism of Defoe and that of Dickens, only exists now in a truncated form; for the copious note overflowed the narrow margins of the 'Quarterly' and had to be extended upon a loose sheet of paper. This sheet was unfortunately mislaid and lost during the long illness that prostrated the editor after Swinburne's death. Under these circumstances it is deemed best to give what remain of Swinburne's added remarks exactly as they were found in the margins of the annotated copy.

As a study of the foremost novelist of the Victorian Era by one of the foremost poets of that 'great,' or, as some say, 'little,' epoch, it has a two-fold interest: the interest attaching to Dickens and the interest attaching to Swinburne. Therefore it should not be withheld from the public any longer. Brief as it is, if it should influence future criticism of Dickens in the

same way that Swinburne's 'Note on Charlotte Brontë' has, ever since its publication, influenced what has been written upon that novelist, it will indeed be an important contribution to literature. In order that it may be the more heartily welcomed as a companion volume to the Brontë book, it has been printed in the same type as that famous critique, so as to range with it.



EDITOR'S PREFACE

I

AS TO CERTAIN OF THE POET'S STRICTURES IN THIS VOLUME

IN a letter received from an esteemed friend of mine, the accomplished editor of the *Quarterly Review*—who has a special right to speak upon the subject—it is suggested that certain remarks about 'other authors' in the Dickens article might now be omitted. This alludes, I take it, to Swinburne's severe strictures upon Matthew Arnold and Andrew Lang. Well, if I had found it possible to follow my own inclination I might perhaps have considered the question of omitting these ebullitions of wrath. But as in the annotated copy of the *Quarterly Review* which Swinburne left behind him the strictures upon these two eminent writers have not been struck out, I cannot see that I have any right to omit them. He himself would certainly not have dreamed of doing so: and

that must be enough for me who knew his character so thoroughly. He held that what a writer has once printed can really never be recalled, as 'the literary ghouls are certain to dig it up.' In view of this dictum of his, how can I be expected to strike out any part of the *Quarterly* article? I might just as reasonably, when a new edition of the companion volume, 'A Note on Charlotte Brontë,' comes to be issued, be expected to strike out Swinburne's equally severe strictures upon George Eliot—indeed more reasonably, for the Brontë book was dedicated to myself. Those strictures upon George Eliot were not misunderstood in the antediluvian days when they appeared (1877) by the students of Swinburne familiar with his methods. Nor ought these later strictures to be misunderstood by present-day readers: they are so characteristic of his warm, impetuous nature. In a word, they must be taken simply as boy-like expressions of Swinburne's resentment against all those who did not fully agree with him as to the transcendent excellence of Dickens. Even with myself, who, during an intimacy more than brotherly of nearly forty years, got nothing but boundless affection from him, he was sometimes apt to grow impatient when I criticised the quality

of Dickens's not very subtle humour, and contrasted it with Sterne's humour at its best.

As to Arnold, no one will deny that Swinburne has on other occasions done full justice to his fine work in verse and prose. Indeed, Arnold himself once spoke to me with the deepest gratitude of Swinburne's appreciation of his poetry, and even went so far as to say that Swinburne's generous and glowing early essay had, at the time of its appearance, been the one thing needful to his being accepted as a poet first and a critic afterwards. And I am sure Arnold meant this, notwithstanding certain disparaging remarks of his about Swinburne that most unfortunately have been unearthed since Arnold's death. Arnold's attitude towards Dickens was irritating to many people, and to Swinburne intolerable.

As to Andrew Lang, far abler pens than mine have recently been busy doing justice to his extraordinary powers, and (what is infinitely more important) his greatness of nature—his rare goodness of heart. With regard, however, to his criticisms prefixed to the Gadshill edition of Dickens, it was, as in the case of Arnold, inevitable, I think, that they should have roused the indignation of a Dickensian so enthusiastic as Swinburne. I observe that one eminent critic

and student of Dickens, Sir William Robertson Nicoll, has lately said, after doing full justice to Lang's criticisms of Sir Walter Scott, 'nothing could be worse than Lang's introductions to Dickens. They almost deserve the tremendous trouncing they received from Mr. Swinburne.' It must be borne in mind that Swinburne was a borderer, and remained a strong borderer all his life. It was a fancy of his that though Englishmen are fully alive to the glory of Scottish humour, Scotsmen are often impervious to the humour of the Southron. It was as an angry borderer that Swinburne uttered the words about Lang being disqualified to express an opinion on the work of an English humorist.

To Swinburne's closest friends it is a cause of real grief that his controversial writings should have given an entirely wrong impression of his character. The world, which can only judge of him from his written utterances, can form no idea whatever of his true nature. Most poets do their inner hearts full justice—more than justice—by their writings. Not so Swinburne. The greatest of English gentlemen, the bravest, the most chivalrous, will go down to posterity entirely misunderstood.

II

SWINBURNE AS A DICKENSIAN

And now, having relieved my mind upon a subject that has been oppressing it for years, I ought perhaps to stop. Yet I am sorely tempted to venture upon a word or two about the equipment of Swinburne as a critic of Dickens. When the *Quarterly* article appeared this equipment was challenged in some quarters on the ground that no man can write adequately about a great humorist who is not a humorist himself. It is, I know, the fashion among those who did not know Swinburne as I did—as his sisters did, as his cousin Mrs. Leith did, as all his intimate friends did—to speak of him as having been lacking in humour. Never was there a greater mistake. The misconception arises, I think, from the very splendour and intensity of his lyrical outbursts. For, as Meredith said in a letter to me immediately after Swinburne's death, 'Song was his natural voice. He was the greatest of our lyrical poets—of the world's, I could say.' It is difficult, no doubt, to associate an impassioned poet of this calibre with humour—especially to associate him with 'fun'—with the 'quips and cranks and practical jokes' which his friend Sir W. B.

Richmond attributed to him lately in a speech at the Savage Club. I verily believe that few men ever lived whose temperament was more humorous than Swinburne's—I *know* that none ever could have lived whose nature was more genial—I might say, joyous. After his shattered health had become restored at The Pines, the joyousness increased with advancing years, and was the most notable feature of his character. The relatives and friends above mentioned have always agreed with me upon this point. And so have all the numerous visitors to The Pines during thirty years. It was his humour, indeed, combined with his ebullient spirits, that helped to make him the most delightful of all companions.

His endowment of humour was hereditary on both sides. I never knew his grandfather, Sir John Swinburne, but he was, no doubt, one of the most brilliant men of his time. Among the numerous gifts of intellect and temperament of the poet's mother, Lady Jane Henrietta Swinburne, one of the sweetest characteristics was what I should be inclined to call a delicate, Jane Austen-like kind of humour, only that it was entirely free from the great novelist's abounding satire. She could tell a humorous anecdote better than Swinburne himself—her method being

quieter and more unconscious—better than any one, I must think. Indeed there was no charm she lacked. And all her children (alas! all gone but one) were full of a humour which, though scarcely so fine, and rare, and tender as hers, was of a peculiarly winsome and playful kind. In Dickens such a family must needs delight as a matter of course.

Swinburne's adoration of Dickens seems to have begun when he was the merest child. He must have been familiar with 'Dombey and Son' very early, for Mrs. Leith tells us how he once arranged his own little brother and sisters and herself, when they were children, into a kind of tableau out of 'Dombey and Son,' himself taking the part of Mrs. Skewton in her bath-chair. Throughout his Eton career, indeed, Swinburne was the same enthusiastic student of Dickens, as Mrs. Leith shows in her early reminiscences of him. It was this lady, it will be remembered (a true and fine poet herself), who collaborated with Swinburne in the early publication, 'The Children of the Chapel.'

The incident of childhood, showing Swinburne as a Dickensian, of course occurred long before I knew him; and it is about him at a later period that ten thousand recollections leap

to my mind of which I would fain record one or two.

During all our close companionship in this house, whenever I entered his study, and found him (as I often did) writing one of those splendid lyrics which Meredith alludes to, Swinburne would start up, and, instead of expressing irritation at the interruption, as any other poet would have done, greet me jocosely—mostly with an appropriate quotation from Dickens—and then, and not till then, would turn to his manuscript and read out what he had written.

He could recite long passages from Dickens and Jane Austen from memory—that prodigious memory of his. In order to introduce Dickens to a child who lived with us, he spent scores of evenings in giving him an oral epitome of Dickens's novels, omitting the portions that were beyond juvenile comprehension. During a long and painful malady, which had stricken the son of a dear friend of his, Swinburne used to walk over to Wimbledon with a novel by Dickens in his pocket to comfort and amuse the invalid by reading out to him. Reading aloud, indeed, was one of Swinburne's greatest pleasures, as his friend Lady Ritchie, and many another, could testify. Down

to the very last year of his life nothing used to delight him more than to read, on her visits to The Pines, to his surviving sister (not a performer in the famous tableau, but a much younger one), Miss Isabel Swinburne, to whom he dedicated one of the loveliest of his poems, 'Heartsease Country.' Readings of this kind were also enjoyed by his cousin and her youngest daughter, and by the little circle here with whom he lived *en famille*.

It has now been fully shown, I think, that Dickens possessed Swinburne through all his life. His romantic feeling about him extended to Dickens's father. In Micawber, Swinburne thought John Dickens was immortalised, not lowered and caricatured by his son, in one of the most delightful characters in all fiction. I had the gratification of making Swinburne a Christmas present of a fine pen-and-ink portrait of Dickens's father, sketched by an admiring friend of John Dickens. It is a much finer face than the novelist's own. At once Swinburne found a place for it on his study wall, and spent many a happy moment in gazing fondly at it.

Many and many a delightful talk have we had of the charming time he once spent with the writer he so much adored. From that memorable meeting the Dickens obsession, as I may call

it, became complete. Scores of visitors to the Pines will recall that nothing awakened his anger so much as any undue disparagement of 'Boz.' And at one time disparagement of him was only too common. A few years after the beginning of my intimacy with Swinburne, a reaction against the old popular favourite set in—the inevitable swinging of the pendulum, I suppose. It became quite the 'correct thing' for the budding journalist to write disrespectfully of Dickens and his work, always to the deep wrath of Swinburne. And yet he was never blind to Dickens's artistic faults, as will be seen; for the criticism here seems to be of a much riper kind than that of the 'Note on Charlotte Brontë.'

T. W.-D.

THE PINES, PUTNEY HILL,
December 1912.

CHARLES DICKENS

IT is only when such names as Shakespeare's or Hugo's rise and remain as the supreme witnesses of what was highest in any particular country at any particular time that there can be no question among any but irrational and impudent men as to the supremacy of their greatest. England, under the reign of Dickens, had other great names to boast of which may well be allowed to challenge the sovereignty of his genius. But as there certainly was no Shakespeare and no Hugo to rival and eclipse his glory, he will probably and

naturally always be accepted and acclaimed as the greatest Englishman of his generation. His first works or attempts at work gave little more promise of such a future than if he had been a Coleridge or a Shelley. No one could have foreseen what all may now foresee in the 'Sketches by Boz'—not only a quick and keen-eyed observer, 'a chiel amang us takin' notes' more notable than Captain Grose's, but a great creative genius. Nor could any one have foreseen it in the early chapters of 'Pickwick'—which, at their best, do better the sort of thing which had been done fairly well before. Sam Weller and Charles Dickens came to life together, immortal and twin-born. In 'Oliver Twist' the quality of a great tragic and comic poet or dramatist

in prose fiction was for the first time combined with the already famous qualities of a great humorist and a born master in the arts of narrative and dialogue.

The first novel of a great novelist has an interest for all readers above the level of the dullard or the sluggard which cannot be impaired by their possible preference for his very ripest and most perfect work. Something of this interest may have been felt by the lovers of *Pickwick* when they found that the great humorist who had already entranced and enraptured the whole English-speaking or English-reading world was beginning to try his hand as the writer of a regular story—a dramatic fiction or poem, such as all true creative work in the form of narrative must be. And now that we can

judge of the result by so exacting a test as that of comparison with the crowning masterpieces of his genius at its full—with ‘David Copperfield’ or with ‘Great Expectations’—we cannot but admit that this result was not merely a success, but a triumph. The bitter and burning pathos of occasional passages in the ‘Pickwick Papers’ had already shown how thoroughly and how deeply the genius as well as the character of Dickens was imbued and possessed by the noble passion of indignant pity; and in ‘Oliver Twist’ there are touches here and there of the hand which was to give us such masterpieces of terrible tenderness and manful truth as we recognise and remember for ever in the figures of Abel Magwitch and Betty Higden. There is the same fire of sympathy,

the same ardour of emotion, not yet so thoroughly trained into perfect service. But in the faults of execution, and even in the failures of conception, there is always the living sign of youth: where the pulse of thought or feeling, of style or fancy, is most feverish, it is the fever of a fine and a healthy nature. The heredity of heroism and spiritual refinement in an outcast child may seem less natural to the literary patients of Dr. Ibsen than the heredity of contagious debasement and degradation by disease: to others it may seem no less credible and very much more amenable to other than medical treatment. At the same time it must be allowed that the virtuous Oliver is now and then rather too like the literary son and heir of a maiden

lady. His innocence is as exasperating to the human boy as was Miss Volumnia Dedlock's to Sir Leicester. 'I think I know that'—'I don't know what that means'—is rather more than the most voracious credulity can swallow and digest. 'What for?' is comparatively imaginable—however deserving of the austere reply, 'For necessary expenses.'

But it is not of the 'sweet Oliver' (as they said in Shakespeare's time) or of his morally malodorous half-brother that we think, when we think of the book which relates the sufferings of the youngster and the sins of the oldster. Master Twist and Mr. Monks are merely necessary figures, without whom we could not enjoy the company of such life-long friends as the

Dodger and Mr. Bumble, Charley Bates and Mrs. Corney, Toby Crackit and Noah Claypole, Kags and Chitling, Fagin and Sikes: though doubtless it is possible that the slight 'deviations from humanity' which could not have alienated the sympathies of a political disunionist from the two last-mentioned victims of circumstance and society may be thought to disqualify them for the friendship of more scrupulous judges. Whether Nancy is to be classed among the real or the unreal figures of the story is of course the crucial question for all critics, as for all readers of it. That Thackeray vehemently and derisively inveighed against the presentation of such a character, under such a light as Dickens thought fit to throw around it, is a fact

which can no more be disguised or overlooked than the counter fact that Dickens vehemently and solemnly protested against all impeachment of its truth. At all events, it is only in the later development of the character that any touch of incongruity or insincerity can be detected or suspected: and then it is not in the action but only in the language that this falsity or weakness of presentation is discernible by any other than a perverse or malignant eye. The action is surely as natural and credible as the language is rhetorical and theatrical. This florid and frothy declamation might be explicable as the crude and flatulent infirmity of youthful eloquence if something of the same distemper were not now and then recognisable in the author's very

ripest and thoughtfulest work. When the tempted and bewildered girl-wife of Mr. Bounderby flies back for refuge to her father's roof, her motive is as natural and pathetic as her explanation is bookish and stagey. On the literary and sentimental side of his work Dickens was but a type of his generation and his class: on the comic and the pathetic, the tragic and the creative side, 'he was not of an age, but for all time.'

It is interesting to remark how many of the minor figures in this early work must remind the appreciative reader of others more fully and happily developed in later and riper books. The excellent if slightly conventional Mr. Brownlow is a first rough sketch or study for the perfect and life-

like portrait of Mr. Jarndyce: the featureless and flaccid virtue of Rose Maylie takes form and life and colour in the noble simplicity and the selfless devotion of Agnes Wickfield and Esther Summerson. These names may be by-words with subtle and superior writers and readers: but there are still some who prefer the type of Sophia Western to the type of Emma Bovary; be it said with all due reverence to the unique genius of Flaubert—a writer often imitated and always inimitable. The most hardened student in the latest school of realistic or analytic fiction might condescend to see merit in a heroine of whom it can truthfully and naturally be said—‘When a young lady is as mild as she’s game, and as game as she’s mild, that’s all

I ask, and more than I expect.' But even if the heroines of Dickens were really as bloodless and as spiritless as they may seem to the admirers of his superior and inferior successors in the shining and changing lists of fiction, there can be no doubt as to the vitality of such immortals as the speaker of the words just quoted. Neither Chaucer nor Molière has ever breathed life into a child of his genius more worthy and more sure of immortality. Blathers and Duff, the Bow-Street runners, will always hold a place in all men's affectionate remembrance, while gratitude cherishes and admiration embalms the name of Conkey Chickweed: but they are faint and pale precursors of the incomparable Mr. Bucket. It is a crowning

feather in the cap of Mr. Wilkie Collins that he alone should have been able to give us in the person of Sergeant Cuff a second detective officer worthy to be named in the same day with that matchless master of them all. Nothing could show more perfectly the progress of creative genius than a comparison between the admirable chapter of 'Oliver Twist' in which the runners play their parts and the wonderful chapter of 'Bleak House' in which Mr. Bucket introduces himself to the family circle of the Bagnets: and I hardly know where in all the world of fiction to look for such another family circle as theirs. The noble English loyalty of Dickens to both the services is one of the most memorable features of his genius and his character.

Thankful as all 'save bats and owls' must be that for once the genius of George Cruikshank was happily yoked in harness with the genius of Charles Dickens, we cannot but repine at the reflection that it was but for once after the date of those 'Sketches by Boz' which may almost be said to illustrate the text of the designs which they accompany and interpret. We look for the hundredth time at the chill and ghastly landscape in which the murderer is alone with the dog he desires to murder, at the tiles of the roof and the stack of chimneys and the glimmering walls and lattices and the smoke-swept sky which give the fittest and the fearfullest relief to the imminence of his doom, and we think how this great tragic artist would have

shown us the wood in which Mr. Jonas Chuzzlewit struck down Mr. Montague Tigg. We look once more into the condemned cell, and we think how he would have shown us the room into which Mr. Jonas crept back in disguise 'as if he dreaded to disturb his own imaginary rest.' We should have seen even more vividly than we now see 'a blotched, stained, mouldering room, like a vault,' the dirty skylight, and some ghastly glimpse of the narrow covered passage beyond. He could not have bettered many if any of the figures we have known and delighted in from our earliest conscious days, but he would have shown us every nook and corner of Mr. Peggotty's abode with so magically homely and so marvelously attractive a touch that a child might

have longed to live there even more than to live in such houses among such landscapes as Cruikshank had made familiar to his infancy in fairyland. He would have shown us the marshes and the river and the sky and the beacon and the gibbet which Dickens shows us as seen by a frightened child with such perfection of power and such vivacity of truth that even the incomparable first chapter of 'Great Expectations' would hardly have been above comparison with his illustration of it. And instead of all this, and of how much more that might and should have been! his time and his genius were spent on the illustration of books which no man opens except to look again at the designs devoted to the service of a text unreadable and unendurable by man.

Like the early works of all other great writers whose critical contemporaries have failed to elude the kindly chance of beneficent oblivion, the early works of Dickens have been made use of to depreciate his later, with the same enlightened and impartial candour which on the appearance of 'Othello' must doubtless have deplored the steady though gradual decline of its author's genius from the unfulfilled promise of excellence held forth by 'Two Gentlemen of Verona.' There may possibly be some faint and flickering shadow of excuse for the dullards, if unmalignant, who prefer 'Nicholas Nickleby' to the riper and sounder fruits of the same splendid and inexhaustible genius. Admirable as it is, full of life and sap and savour, the strength

and the weakness of youth are so singularly mingled in the story and the style that readers who knew nothing of its date might naturally have assumed that it must have been the writer's first attempt at fiction. There is perhaps no question which would more thoroughly test the scholarship of the student than this:—What do you know of Jane Dibabs and Horatio Peltirogus? At fourscore and ten it might be thought 'too late a week' for a reader to revel with insuppressible delight in a first reading of the chapters which enrol all worthy readers in the company of Mr. Vincent Crummles; but I can bear witness to the fact that this effect was produced on a reader of that age who had earned honour and respect in public life, affection and veneration in

private.¹ It is not, on the other hand, less curious and significant that Sydney Smith, who had held out against Sam Weller, should have been conquered by Miss Squeers; that her letter, which of all Dickens's really good things is perhaps the most obviously imitative and suggestive of its model, should have converted so great an elder humorist to appreciation of a greater than himself; that the echo of familiar fun, an echo from the grave of Smollett, should have done what finer and more original strokes of comic genius had unaccountably failed to do. But in all criticism of such work the merely personal element of the critic, the natural atmosphere in which his mind or his insight works, and

¹ See Illustrative Note No. 1.

uses its faculties of appreciation, is really the first and last thing to be taken into account.

No mortal man or woman, no human boy or girl, can resist the fascination of Mr. and Mrs. Quilp, of Mr. and Miss Brass, of Mr. Swiveller and his Marchioness; but even the charm of Mrs. Jarley and her surroundings, the magic which enthrals us in the presence of a Codlin and a Short, cannot mesmerise or hypnotise us into belief that the story of 'The Old Curiosity Shop' is in any way a good story. But this is the first book in which the background or setting is often as impressive as the figures which can hardly be detached from it in our remembered impression of the whole design. From Quilp's Wharf

to Plashwater Weir Mill Lock, the river belongs to Dickens by right of conquest or creation. The part it plays in more than a few of his books is indivisible from the parts played in them by human actors beside it or upon it. Of such actors in this book, the most famous as an example of her creator's power as a master of pathetic tragedy would thoroughly deserve her fame if she were but a thought more human and more credible. 'The child' has never a touch of childhood about her; she is an impeccable and invariable portent of devotion, without a moment's lapse into the humanity of frailty in temper or in conduct. Dickens might as well have fitted her with a pair of wings at once. A woman might possibly be as patient, as resourceful, as

indefatigable in well-doing and as faultless in perception of the right thing to do; it would be difficult to make her deeply interesting, but she might be made more or less of an actual creature. But a child whom nothing can ever irritate, whom nothing can ever baffle, whom nothing can ever misguide, whom nothing can ever delude, and whom nothing can ever dismay, is a monster as inhuman as a baby with two heads.¹

Outside the class which excludes all but the highest masterpieces of poetry it is difficult to find or to imagine a faultless work of creation—in other words, a faultless work of fiction; but the story of ‘Barnaby Rudge’ can hardly, in common justice, be said to fall short of this crowning

¹ See Illustrative Note No. 2.

praise. And in this book, even if not in any of its precursors, an appreciative reader must recognise a quality of humour which will remind him of Shakespeare, and perhaps of Aristophanes. The impetuous and irrepressible volubility of Miss Miggs, when once her eloquence breaks loose and finds vent like raging water or fire, is powerful enough to overbear for the moment any slight objection which a severe morality might suggest with respect to the rectitude and propriety of her conduct. It is impossible to be rigid in our judgment of

‘a toiling, moiling, constant-working, always-being-found-fault-with, never-giving-satisfactions, nor-having-no-time-to-clean-oneself, potter’s wessel,’ whose ‘only becoming occupations is to help young flaunting pagins to brush and comb and titiwate theirselves into whitening and sup-pulchres, and leave the young men to think that

there an't a bit of padding in it nor no pinching-ins nor fillings-out nor pomatums nor deceits nor earthly vanities.'

To have made malignity as delightful for an instant as simplicity, and Miss Miggs as enchanting as Mrs. Quickly or Mrs. Gamp, is an unsurpassable triumph of dramatic humour.

But the advance in tragic power is even more notable and memorable than this. The pathos, indeed, is too cruel; the tortures of the idiot's mother and the murderer's wife are so fearful that interest and sympathy are wellnigh superseded or overbalanced by a sense of horror rather than of pity; magnificent as is the power of dramatic invention which animates every scene in every stage of her martyrdom.

Dennis is the first of those consummate and wonderful ruffians, with two vile faces under one frowsy hood, whose captain or commander-in-chief is Rogue Riderhood ; more fearful by far, though not (one would hope) more natural, than Henriet Cousin, who could hardly breathe when fastening the rope round Esmeralda's neck, ' *tant la chose l'apitoyait* ' ; a divine touch of surviving humanity which would have been impossible to the more horrible hangman whose mortal agony in immediate prospect of the imminent gallows is as terribly memorable as anything in the tragedy of fiction or the poetry of prose. His fellow hangbird is a figure no less admirable throughout all his stormy and fiery career till the last moment ; and then he drops into poetry. Nor is it

poetry above the reach of Silas Wegg which 'invokes the curse of all its victims on that black tree, of which he is the ripened fruit.' The writer's impulse was noble; but its expression or its effusion is such as indifference may deride and sympathy must deplore. Twice only did the greatest English writer of his day make use of history as a background or a stage for fiction; the use made of it in 'Barnaby Rudge' is even more admirable in the lifelike tragedy and the terrible comedy of its presentation than the use made of it in 'A Tale of Two Cities.'

Dickens was doubtless right in his preference of 'David Copperfield' to all his other masterpieces; it is only among dunces that it is held improbable or impossible for a great writer to judge aright of his own

work at its best, to select and to prefer the finest and the fullest example of his active genius ; but, when all deductions have been made from the acknowledgment due to the counter-claim of ' Martin Chuzzlewit,' the fact remains that in that unequal and irregular masterpiece his comic and his tragic genius rose now and then to the very highest pitch of all. No son of Adam and no daughter of Eve on this God's earth, as his occasional friend Mr. Carlyle might have expressed it, could have imagined it possible—humanly possible—for anything in later comedy to rival the unspeakable perfection of Mrs. Quickly's eloquence at its best ; at such moments as when her claim to be acknowledged as Lady Falstaff was reinforced, if not by the spiritual authority

of Master Dumb, by the correlative evidence of Mrs. Keech ; but no reader above the level of intelligence which prefers to Shakespeare the Parisian Ibsen and the Norwegian Sardou can dispute the fact that Mrs. Gamp has once and again risen even to that unimaginable supremacy of triumph.

At the first interview vouchsafed to us with the adorable Sairey, we feel that no words can express our sense of the divinely altruistic and devoted nature which finds utterance in the sweetly and sublimely simple words—‘ If I could afford to lay all my feller creeturs out for nothink, I would gladly do it: sich is the love I bear ’em.’ We think of little Tommy Harris, and the little red worsted shoe

gurgling in his throat; of the previous occasion when his father sought shelter and silence in an empty dog-kennel; of that father's immortally infamous reflection on the advent of his ninth; of religious feelings, of life, and the end of all things; of Mr. Gamp, his wooden leg, and their precious boy; of her calculations and her experiences with reference to birth and death; of her views as to the expediency of travel by steam, which anticipated Ruskin's and those of later dissenters from the gospel of hurry and the religion of mechanism; of the contents of Mrs. Harris's pocket; of the incredible incredulity of the infidel Mrs. Prig; we think of all this, and of more than all this, and acknowledge with infinite

thanksgiving of inexhaustible laughter and of rapturous admiration the very greatest comic poet or creator that ever lived to make the life of other men more bright and more glad and more perfect than ever, without his beneficent influence, it possibly or imaginably could have been.

The advance in power of tragic invention, the increased strength in grasp of character and grip of situation, which distinguishes Chuzzlewit from *Nickleby*, may be tested by comparison of the leading villains. Ralph Nickleby might almost have walked straight off the boards on which the dramatic genius of his nephew was employed to bring into action two tubs and a pump: Jonas Chuzzlewit has his place of eminence for ever among the most

memorable types of living and breathing wickedness that ever were stamped and branded with immortality by the indignant genius of a great and unrelenting master. Neither Vautrin nor Thénardier has more of evil and of deathless life in him.

It is not only by his masterpieces, it is also by his inferior works or even by his comparative failures that the greatness of a great writer may be reasonably judged and tested. We can measure in some degree the genius of Thackeray by the fact that 'Pendennis,' with all its marvellous wealth of character and humour and living truth, has never been and never will be rated among his very greatest works. 'Dombey and Son' cannot be held nearly so much of a success as 'Pendennis.' I have known

a man of the very highest genius and the most fervent enthusiasm for that of Dickens who never could get through it. There is nothing of a story, and all that nothing (to borrow a phrase from Martial) is bad. The Roman starveling had nothing to lose, and lost it all: the story of Dombey has no plot, and that a very stupid one. The struttingly offensive father and his gushingly submissive daughter are failures of the first magnitude. Little Paul is a more credible child than little Nell; he sometimes forgets that he is foredoomed by a more than Pauline or Calvinistic law of predestination to die in the odour of sentiment, and says or thinks or does something really and quaintly childlike. But we get, to say

the least, a good deal of him; and how much too little do we get of Jack Bunsby! Not so very much more than of old Bill Barley; and yet those two ancient mariners are berthed for ever in the inmost shrine of our affections. Another patch of the very brightest purple sewn into the sometimes rather threadbare stuff or groundwork of the story is the scene in which the dissolution of a ruined household is so tragically set before us in the breaking up of the servants' hall. And when we think upon the cherished names of Toots and Nipper, Gills and Cuttle, Rob the Grinder and good Mrs. Brown, we are tempted to throw conscience to the winds, and affirm that the book is a good book.

But even if we admit that here was an interlude of comparative failure, we cannot but feel moved to acclaim with all the more ardent gratitude the appearance of the next and perhaps the greatest gift bestowed on us by this magnificent and immortal benefactor. 'David Copperfield,' from the first chapter to the last, is unmistakable by any eye above the level and beyond the insight of a beetle's as one of the masterpieces to which time can only add a new charm and an unimaginable value. The narrative is as coherent and harmonious as that of 'Tom Jones'; and to say this is to try it by the very highest and apparently the most unattainable standard. But I must venture to reaffirm my conviction that even the

glorious masterpiece of Fielding's radiant and beneficent genius, if in some points superior, is by no means superior in all. Tom is a far completer and more living type of gallant boyhood and generous young manhood than David; but even the lustre of Partridge is pallid and lunar beside the noontide glory of Micawber. Blifil is a more poisonously plausible villain than Uriah: Sophia Western remains unequalled except by her sister heroine Amelia as a perfectly credible and adorable type of young English womanhood, naturally 'like one of Shakespeare's women,' socially as fine and true a lady as Congreve's Millamant or Angelica. But even so large-minded and liberal a genius as Fielding's could never have conceived

any figure like Miss Trotwood's, any group like that of the Peggottys. As easily could it have imagined and realised the magnificent setting of the story, with its homely foreground of street or wayside and its background of tragic sea.

The perfect excellence of this masterpiece has perhaps done some undeserved injury to the less impeccable works of genius which immediately succeeded it. But in 'Bleak House' the daring experiment of combination or alternation which divides a story between narrative in the third person and narrative in the first is justified and vindicated by its singular and fascinating success. 'Esther's narrative' is as good as her creator's; and no enthusiasm of praise could overrate the excellence of them both.

For wealth and variety of character none of the master's works can be said to surpass and few can be said to equal it. When all necessary allowance has been made for occasional unlikeliness in detail or questionable methods of exposition, the sustained interest and the terrible pathos of Lady Dedlock's tragedy will remain unaffected and unimpaired. Any reader can object that a lady visiting a slum in the disguise of a servant would not have kept jewelled rings on her fingers for the inspection of a crossing-sweeper, or that a less decorous and plausible way of acquainting her with the fact that a scandalous episode in her early life was no longer a secret for the family lawyer could hardly have been imagined than the public narrative of

her story in her own drawing-room by way of an evening's entertainment for her husband and their guests. To these objections, which any Helot of culture whose brain may have been affected by habitual indulgence in the academic delirium of self-complacent superiority may advance or may suggest with the most exquisite infinity of impertinence, it may be impossible to retort an equally obvious and inconsiderable objection.

But to a far more serious charge, which even now appears to survive the confutation of all serious evidence, it is incomprehensible and inexplicable that Dickens should have returned no better an answer than he did. Harold Skimpole was said to be Leigh Hunt; a rascal after the order

of Wainewright, without the poisoner's comparatively and diabolically admirable audacity of frank and fiendish self-esteem, was assumed to be meant for a portrait or a caricature of an honest man and a man of unquestionable genius. To this most serious and most disgraceful charge Dickens merely replied that he never anticipated the identification of the rascal Skimpole with the fascinating Harold—the attribution of imaginary villainy to the original model who suggested or supplied a likeness for the externally amiable and ineffectually accomplished loungeur and shuffler through life. The simple and final reply should have been that indolence was the essential quality of the character and conduct and philo-

sophy of Skimpole—‘a perfectly idle man : a mere amateur,’ as he describes himself to the sympathetic and approving Sir Leicester ; that Leigh Hunt was one of the hardest and steadiest workers on record, throughout a long and chequered life, at the toilsome trade of letters ; and therefore that to represent him as a heartless and shameless idler would have been about as rational an enterprise, as lifelike a design after the life, as it would have been to represent Shelley as a gluttonous and canting hypocrite or Byron as a loyal and unselfish friend.¹ And no one as yet, I believe, has pretended to recognise in Mr. Jarndyce a study from Byron, in Mr. Chadband a libel on Shelley.

¹ See Illustrative Note No. 3.

Of the two shorter novels which would suffice to preserve for ever the fame of Dickens, some readers will as probably always prefer 'Hard Times' as others will prefer 'A Tale of Two Cities.' The later of these is doubtless the most ingeniously and dramatically invented and constructed of all the master's works; the earlier seems to me the greater in moral and pathetic and humorous effect. The martyr workman, beautiful as is the study of his character and terrible as is the record of his tragedy, is almost too spotless a sufferer and a saint; the lifelong lapidation of this unluckier Stephen is somewhat too consistent and insistent and persistent for any record but that of a martyrology; but the obdurate and

histrionic affectation which animates the brutality and stimulates the selfishness of Mr. Bounderby is only too lamentably truer and nearer to the unlovely side of life. Mr. Ruskin—a name never to be mentioned without reverence — thought otherwise; but in knowledge and insight into character and ethics that nobly minded man of genius was no more comparable to Dickens than in sanity of ardour and rationality of aspiration for progressive and practical reform.

As a social satirist Dickens is usually considered to have shown himself at his weakest; the curious and seemingly incorrigible ignorance which imagined that the proper title of Sir John Smith's wife was Lady John Smith, and that the same

noble peer could be known to his friends and parasites alternately as Lord Jones and Lord James Jones, may naturally make us regret the absence from their society of our old Parisian friend Sir Brown, Esquire ; but though such singular designations as these were never rectified or removed from the text of 'Nicholas Nickleby,' and though a Lady Kew was as far outside the range of his genius as a Madame Marneffe, his satire of social pretension and pretence was by no means always 'a swordstroke in the water' or a flourish in the air. Mrs. Sparsit is as typical and immortal as any figure of Molière's; and the fact that Mr. Sparsit was a Powler is one which can never be forgotten.

There is no surer way of testing the greatness of a really great writer than by consideration of his work at its weakest, and comparison of that comparative weakness with the strength of lesser men at their strongest and their best. The romantic and fanciful comedy of 'Love's Labour's Lost' is hardly a perceptible jewel in the sovereign crown of Shakespeare; but a single passage in a single scene of it—the last of the fourth act—is more than sufficient to outweigh, to outshine, to eclipse and efface for ever the dramatic lucubrations or prescriptions of Dr. Ibsen—Fracastoro of the drama—and his volubly grateful patients. Among the mature works of Dickens and of Thackeray, I suppose most readers would agree in the opinion that the least satisfactory, if

considered as representative of the authors' incomparable powers, are 'Little Dorrit' and 'The Virginians'; yet no one above the intellectual level of an Ibsenite or a Zolaist will doubt or will deny that there is enough merit in either of these books for the stable foundation of an enduring fame.

The conception of 'Little Dorrit' was far happier and more promising than that of 'Dombey and Son'; which indeed is not much to say for it. Mr. Dombey is a doll; Mr. Dorrit is an everlasting figure of comedy in its most tragic aspect and tragedy in its most comic phase. Little Dorrit herself might be less untruly than unkindly described as Little Nell grown big, or, in Milton's phrase, 'writ large.' But on that very account she is a more credible and

therefore a more really and rationally pathetic figure. The incomparable incoherence of the parts which pretend in vain to compose the incomposite story may be gauged by the collapse of some of them and the vehement hurry of cramped and halting invention which huddles up the close of it without an attempt at the rational and natural evolution of others. It is like a child's dissected map with some of the counties or kingdoms missing. Much, though certainly not all, of the humour is of the poorest kind possible to Dickens; and the reiterated repetition of comic catchwords and tragic illustrations of character is such as to affect the nerves no less than the intelligence of the reader with irrepressible irritation. But this, if he be wise, will be

got over and kept under by his sense of admiration and of gratitude for the unsurpassable excellence of the finest passages and chapters. The day after the death of Mr. Merdle is one of the most memorable dates in all the record of creative history—or, to use one word in place of two, in all the record of fiction. The fusion of humour and horror in the marvellous chapter which describes it is comparable only with the kindred work of such creators as the authors of 'Les Misérables' and 'King Lear.' And nothing in the work of Balzac is newer and truer and more terrible than the relentless yet not unmerciful evolution of the central figure in the story. The Father of the Marshalsea is so pitiably worthy of pity as well as of scorn that it would have seemed

impossible to heighten or to deepen the contempt or the compassion of the reader ; but when he falls from adversity to prosperity he succeeds in soaring down and sinking up to a more tragicomic ignominy of more aspiring degradation. And his end is magnificent.

It must always be interesting as well as curious to observe the natural attitude of mind, the inborn instinct of intelligent antipathy or sympathy, discernible or conjecturable in the greatest writer of any nation at any particular date, with regard to the characteristic merits or demerits of foreigners. Dickens was once most unjustly taxed with injustice to the French, by an evidently loyal and cordial French critic, on the ground that the one Frenchman of any

mark in all his books was a murderer. The polypseudonymous ruffian who uses and wears out as many stolen names as ever did even the most cowardly virulent of literary poisoners is doubtless an unlovely figure: but not even Mr. Peggotty and his infant niece are painted with more tender and fervent sympathy than the good Corporal and little Bebelles. Hugo could not—even omnipotence has its limits—have given a more perfect and living picture of a hero and a child. I wish I could think he would have given it as the picture of an English hero and an English child. But I do think that Italian readers of 'Little Dorrit' ought to appreciate and to enjoy the delightful and admirable personality of Cavalletto. Mr. Baptist in Bleeding Heart Yard is as

attractively memorable a figure as his excellent friend Signor Panco.

And how much more might be said—would the gods annihilate but time and space for a worthier purpose than that of making two lovers happy—of the splendid successes to be noted in the least successful book or books of this great and inexhaustible writer! And if the figure or development of the story in 'Little Dorrit,' the shapeliness in parts or the proportions of the whole, may seem to have suffered from tight-lacing in this part and from padding in that, the harmony and unity of the masterpiece which followed it made ample and magnificent amends. In 'A Tale of Two Cities' Dickens, for the second and last time, did history the honour to enrol it

in the service of fiction. This faultless work of tragic and creative art has nothing of the rich and various exuberance which makes of 'Barnaby Rudge' so marvellous an example of youthful genius in all the glowing growth of its bright and fiery April; but it has the classic and poetic symmetry of perfect execution and of perfect design. One or two of the figures in the story which immediately preceded it are unusually liable to the usually fatuous objection which dullness has not yet grown decently ashamed of bringing against the characters of Dickens: to the charge of exaggeration and unreality in the posture or the mechanism of puppets and of daubs, which found its final and supremely offensive expression in the chattering duncery

and the impudent malignity of so consummate and pseudosophical a quack as George Henry Lewes. Not even such a past-master in the noble science of defamation could plausibly have dared to cite in support of his insolent and idiotic impeachment either the leading or the supplementary characters in 'A Tale of Two Cities.' The pathetic and heroic figure of Sydney Carton seems rather to have cast into the shade of comparative neglect the no less living and admirable figures among and over which it stands and towers in our memory. Miss Pross and Mr. Lorry, Madame Defarge and her husband, are equally and indisputably to be recognised by the sign of eternal life.

Among the highest landmarks of success

ever reared for immortality by the triumphant genius of Dickens, the story of 'Great Expectations' must for ever stand eminent beside that of 'David Copperfield.' These are his great twin masterpieces. Great as they are, there is nothing in them greater than the very best things in some of his other books: there is certainly no person preferable and there is possibly no person comparable to Samuel Weller or to Sarah Gamp. Of the two childish and boyish autobiographers, David is the better little fellow though not the more lifelike little friend; but of all first chapters is there any comparable for impression and for fusion of humour and terror and pity and fancy and truth to that which confronts the child with the convict on the marshes in the twi-

light? And the story is incomparably the finer story of the two; there can be none superior, if there be any equal to it, in the whole range of English fiction. And except in 'Vanity Fair' and 'The Newcomes,' if even they may claim exception, there can surely be found no equal or nearly equal number of living and everliving figures. The tragedy and the comedy, the realism and the dreamery of life, are fused or mingled together with little less than Shakespearean strength and skill of hand. To have created Abel Magwitch is to be a god indeed among the creators of deathless men. Pumblechook is actually better and droller and truer to imaginative life than Pecksniff: Joe Gargery is worthy to have been praised and loved at once by Fielding and by Sterne:

Mr. Jaggers and his clients, Mr. Wemmick and his parent and his bride, are such figures as Shakespeare, when dropping out of poetry, might have created, if his lot had been cast in a later century. Can as much be said for the creatures of any other man or god? The ghastly tragedy of Miss Havisham could only have been made at once credible and endurable by Dickens; he alone could have reconciled the strange and sordid horror with the noble and pathetic survival of possible emotion and repentance. And he alone could have eluded condemnation for so gross an oversight as the escape from retribution of so important a criminal as the 'double murderer and monster' whose baffled or inadequate attempts are enough to make Bill

Sikes seem comparatively the gentlest and Jonas Chuzzlewit the most amiable of men. I remember no such flaw in any other story I ever read. But in this story it may well have been allowed to pass unrebuked and unobserved; which yet I think it should not.

Among all the minor and momentary figures which flash into eternity across the stage of Dickens, there is one to which I have never yet seen the tribute of grateful homage adequately or even decently paid. The sonorous claims of old Bill Barley on the reader's affectionate and respectful interest have not remained without response; but the landlord's Jack has never yet, as far as I am aware, been fully recognised as great among the greatest

of the gods of comic fiction. We are introduced to this lifelong friend in a waterside public-house as a 'grizzled male creature, the "Jack" of the little causeway, who was as slimy and smeary as if he had been low water-mark too.' It is but for a moment that we meet him: but eternity is in that moment.

'While we were comforting ourselves by the fire after our meal, the Jack—who was sitting in a corner, and who had a bloated pair of shoes on, which he had exhibited, while we were eating our eggs and bacon, as interesting relics that he had taken a few days ago from the feet of a drowned seaman washed ashore—asked me if we had seen a four-oared galley going up with the tide? When I told him No, he said she must have gone down then, and yet she "took up two," when she left there.

'“They must ha' thought better on't for some reason or another,” said the Jack, “and gone down.”

“A four-oared galley, did you say?” said I.

“A four,” said the Jack, “and two sitters.”

“Did they come ashore here?”

“They put in with a stone two-gallon jar for some beer. I’d ha’ been glad to pison the beer myself,” said the Jack, “or put some rattling physic in it.”

“Why?”

“I know why,” said the Jack. He spoke in a slushy voice, as if much mud had washed into his throat.

“He thinks,” said the landlord, a weakly meditative man with a pale eye, who seemed to rely greatly on his Jack, “he thinks they was, what they wasn’t.”

“I knows what I thinks,” observed the Jack.

“You thinks Custum ’Us, Jack?” said the landlord.

“I do,” said the Jack.

“Then you’re wrong, Jack.”

“AM I!”

‘In the infinite meaning of his reply and his boundless confidence in his views, the Jack took one of his bloated shoes off, looked into it, knocked a few stones out of it on the kitchen floor, and put it on again. He did this with the

air of a Jack who was so right that he could afford to do anything.

“ “ Why, what do you make out that they done with their buttons then, Jack ? ” said the landlord, vacillating weakly.

“ “ Done with their buttons ? ” returned the Jack. “ Chucked ’em overboard. Swallowed ’em. Sowed ’em, to come up small salad. Done with their buttons ! ”

“ “ Don’t be cheeky, Jack,” remonstrated the landlord, in a melancholy and pathetic way.

“ “ A Custum ’Us officer knows what to do with his Buttons,” said the Jack, repeating the obnoxious word with the greatest contempt, “ when they comes betwixt him and his own light. A Four and two sitters don’t go hanging and hovering, up with one tide and down with another, and both with and against another, without there being Custum ’Us at the bottom of it.” Saying which, he went out in disdain —

to join Francis the drawer and Cob the water-bearer in an ever-blessed immortality.

This was the author’s last great work :

the defects in it are as nearly imperceptible as spots on the sun or shadows on a sunlit sea. His last long story, 'Our Mutual Friend,' superior as it is in harmony and animation to 'Little Dorrit' or 'Dombey and Son,' belongs to the same class of piebald or rather skewbald fiction. As in the first great prose work of the one greater and far greater genius then working in the world the cathedral of Notre Dame is the one prevailing and dominating presence, the supreme and silent witness of life and action and passion and death, so in this last of its writer's completed novels the real protagonist—for the part it plays is rather active than passive—is the river. Of a play attributed on the obviously worthless authority of all who

knew or who could have known anything about the matter to William Shakespeare, but now ascribed on the joint authority of Bedlam and Hanwell to the joint authorship of Francis Bacon and John Fletcher, assisted by the fraternal collaboration of their fellow-poets Sir Walter Raleigh and King James I, it was very unjustly said by Dr. Johnson that 'the genius of the author comes in and goes out with Queen Katherine.' Of this book it might more justly be said that the genius of the author ebbs and flows with the disappearance and the reappearance of the Thames.

That unfragrant and insanitary waif of its rottenest refuse, the incomparable Rogue Riderhood, must always hold a

chosen place among the choicest villains of our selectest acquaintance. When the genius of his immortal creator said 'Let there be Riderhood,' and there was Riderhood, a figure of coequal immortality rose reeking and skulking into sight. The deliciously amphibious nature of the venomous human reptile is so wonderfully preserved in his transference from Southwark Bridge to Plashwater Weir Mill Lockhouse that we feel it impossible for imagination to detach the water-snake from the water, the water-rat from the mud. There is a horrible harmony, a hellish consistency, in the hideous part he takes in the martyrdom of Betty Higden—the most nearly intolerable tragedy in all the tragic work of Dickens. Even the

unsurpassed and unsurpassable grandeur and beauty of the martyred old heroine's character can hardly make the wonderful record of her heroic agony endurable by those who have been so tenderly and so powerfully compelled to love and to revere her. The divine scene in the children's hospital is something that could only have been conceived and that could only have been realised by two of the greatest among writers and creators: it is a curious and memorable thing that they should have shone upon our sight together. We can only guess what manner of tribute Victor Hugo might have paid to Dickens on reading how Johnny 'bequeathed all he had to dispose of, and arranged his affairs in this world.'

But a more incomparable scene than this is the resurrection of Rogue Riderhood. That is one of the very greatest works of any creator who ever revealed himself as a master of fiction: a word, it should be unnecessary to repeat, synonymous with the word creation. The terrible humour of it holds the reader entranced alike at the first and the hundredth reading. And the blatant boobies who deny truthfulness and realism to the imagination or the genius of Dickens, because it never condescended or aspired to wallow in metaphysics or in filth, may be fearlessly challenged to match this scene for tragicomic and everlasting truth in the work of Sardou or Ibsen, of the bisexual George Eliot or the masculine 'Miss Mævia' X

Mannish.' M. Zola, had he imagined it, as undoubtedly his potent and indisputable genius might have done, must have added a flavour of blood and a savour of ordure which would hardly have gratified or tickled the nostrils and the palate of Dickens: but it is possible that this insular delicacy or prudery of relish and of sense may not be altogether a pitiable infirmity or a derisible defect. Every scene in which Mr. Inspector or Miss Abbey Potterson figures is as lifelike as it could be if it were foul instead of fair—if it were as fetid with the reek of malodorous realism as it is fragrant with the breath of kindly and homely nature. The ideal inspiration of the butcher and the scavenger is really not more real, because certain self-styled

naturalists may naturally assume and may noisily aver that it is, than that of a Fielding or a Scott, a Thackeray or a Dickens.

The fragmentary 'Mystery of Edwin Drood' has things in it worthy of Dickens at his best: whether the completed work would probably have deserved a place among his best must always be an open question. It is certain that if Shakespeare had completed 'The Two Noble Kinsmen'; if Hugo had completed 'Les Jumeaux'; or if Thackeray had completed 'Denis Duval,' the world would have been richer by a deathless and a classic masterpiece. It is equally certain that the grim and tragic humours of the opium den and the boy-devil are worthy of the author

of 'Barnaby Rudge,' that the leading villain is an original villain of great promise, and that the interest which assuredly, for the average reader, is not awakened in Mr. Drood and Miss Bud is naturally aroused by the sorrows and perils of the brother and sister whose history is inwoven with theirs. It is uncertain beyond all reach of reasonable conjecture whether the upshot of the story would have been as satisfactory as the conclusion, for instance, of 'David Copperfield' or 'Martin Chuzzlewit,' or as far from satisfactory as the close of 'Little Dorrit' or 'Dombey and Son.'

If Dickens had never in his life undertaken the writing of a long story, he would still be great among the immortal writers

of his age by grace of his matchless excellence as a writer of short stories. His earlier Christmas books might well suffice for the assurance of a lasting fame; and the best of them are far surpassed in excellence by his contributions to the Christmas numbers of his successive magazines. We remember the noble 'Chimes,' the delightful 'Carol,' the entrancing 'Cricket on the Hearth,' the delicious Tetterbys who make 'The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain' immortal and unghostly, and even the good stolid figure of Clemency Newcome, which redeems from the torpid peace of absolute nonentity so nearly complete a failure as 'The Battle of Life'; but the Christmas work done for 'Household

Words' and 'All the Year Round' is at its best on a higher level than the best of these. 'The Wreck of the Golden Mary' is the work of a genius till then unimaginable—a Defoe with a human heart. More life-like or more accurate in seamanship, more noble and natural in manhood, it could not have been if the soul of Shakespeare or of Hugo had entered into the somewhat inhuman or at least insensitive genius which begot Robinson Crusoe on Moll Flanders. 'The Perils of Certain English Prisoners' must always challenge comparison with this masterpiece, and will always be found able to sustain it.

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Among the others every reader will always have his special favourites: I do not

say his chosen favourites ; he will not choose but find them : it is not a question to be settled by judgment but by instinct. All are as good of their kind as they need be : children and schoolboys, soldiers and sailors, showmen and waiters, landladies and cheap-jacks, signalmen and cellarmen : all of them actual and convincing, yet all of them sealed of the tribe of Dickens ; real if ever any figures in any book were real, yet as unmistakable in their paternity as the children of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, or of Fielding. A modest and honest critic will always, when dealing with questions of preference in such matters, be guided by the example of the not always exemplary Mr. Jingle—‘not presume to dictate, but broiled fowl and mushrooms—capital thing!’ He may

in that case indicate his own peculiar addiction to the society of Toby Magsman and Mr. Chops, Captain Jorgan, Mr. Christopher (surely one of the most perfect figures ever drawn and coloured by such a hand as Shakespeare's or Dekker's or Sterne's or Thackeray's), Mrs. Lirriper and Major Jackman, Dr. Marigold and Barbox Brothers. The incredible immensity, measurable by no critic ever born, of such a creative power as was needed to call all these into immortal life would surely, had Dickens never done any work on a larger scale of invention and construction, have sufficed for a fame great enough to deserve the applause and the thanksgiving of all men worthy to acclaim it, and the contempt of such a Triton of the minnows as Matthew

Arnold. A man whose main achievement in creative literature was to make himself by painful painstaking into a sort of pseudo- Wordsworth could pay no other tribute than that of stolid scorn to a genius of such inexhaustible force and such indisputable originality as that of Charles Dickens. It is not always envy, I hope and believe, which disables and stupefies such brilliant and versatile examples of the minor poet and the minor critic when appreciation of anything new and great is found impossible for their self-complacent and self-centred understanding to attain. It is just that they cannot see high enough; they [were born so, and will please themselves; as they do, and always did, and always will. And not even the tribute of equals or

superiors is more precious and more significant than such disdain or such distaste as theirs.

These Christmas numbers are not, because of their small bulk, to be classed among the minor works of Dickens: they are gems as costly as any of the larger in his crown of fame. Of his lesser works the best and most precious is beyond all question or comparison 'The Uncommercial Traveller'; a book which would require another volume of the same size to praise it adequately or aright. Not that there are not other short studies as good as its very best among the 'reprinted pieces' which preserve for us and for all time the beloved figure of Our Bore, the less delightful figures of the

noble savage and the begging-letter writer, the pathetic plaint of Mr. Meek, and the incomparable studies and stories of the detective police. We could perhaps dispense with 'Pictures from Italy,' and even with 'American Notes,' except for the delicious account or narrative or description of sea-sickness, which will always give such exquisite intensity of rapture to boys born impervious to that ailment and susceptible only of enjoyment in rough weather at sea as can hardly be rivalled by the delight of man or boy in Mrs. Gamp herself. But there is only one book which I cannot but regret that Dickens should have written; and I cannot imagine what evil imp, for what inscrutable reason in the unjustifiable designs of a malevolent Providence, was

ever permitted to suggest to him the perpetration of a 'Child's History of England.' I would almost as soon train up a child on Catholic or Calvinistic or servile or disloyal principles as on the cheap-jack radicalism which sees nothing to honour or love or revere in history, and ought therefore to confess that it can in reason pretend to see nothing on which to build any hope of patriotic advance or progressive endurance in the future.

A word may be added on the everlasting subject of editors and editions: a subject on which it really seems impossible that the countrymen of Shakespeare and of Dickens should ever be aroused to a sense that the matter is really worth care and consideration. Instead of reprinting

the valuable and interesting prefaces written by Dickens for the first cheap edition of his collected works (a poor little double-columned reissue), the publishers of the beautiful and convenient Gadshill series are good enough to favour its purchasers with the prefatory importunities of a writer disentitled to express and disqualified to form an opinion on the work of an English humorist. The intrusive condescension or adulation of such a commentator was perhaps somewhat superfluous in front of the reprinted Waverley Novels; the offence becomes an outrage, the impertinence become impudence, when such rubbish is shot down before the doorstep of Charles Dickens.

It is curious to compare the posthumous

fortune of two such compeers in fame as Dickens and Thackeray. Rivals they were not and could not be: comparison or preference of their respective work is a subject fit only to be debated by the energetic idleness of boyhood. In life Dickens was the more prosperous: Thackeray has had the better fortune after death. To the exquisite genius, the tender devotion, the faultless taste and the unfailing tact of his daughter, we owe the most perfect memorial ever raised to the fame and to the character of any great writer on record by any editor or commentator or writer of prefaces or preludes to his work. A daughter of Dickens has left us a very charming little volume of reminiscences in which we enjoy the pleasure and honour of

admission to his private presence: we yet await an edition of his works which may be worthy to stand beside the biographical edition of Thackeray's. So much we ought to have: we can demand and we can desire no more.

ILLUSTRATIVE NOTES

No. I

IT is interesting to recall that the allusion to the patriarch who shortly before completing his hundredth year revelled in the boyish fun of 'Nicholas Nickleby,' was to Swinburne's grandfather, a humorist of the first order, a most extraordinary man whom Swinburne was never tired of talking about, and whose portrait he himself has thus painted in a letter to the late Clarence Stedman :

'My father, Admiral Swinburne, is the second son of Sir John Swinburne, a person whose life would be better worth writing than mine. Born and brought up in France, his father (I believe) a naturalized Frenchman (we were all Catholic and Jacobite rebels and exiles) and his mother a lady of the house of Polignac (a quaint political relationship for me, as you will admit), my grandfather never left France till called away at twenty-five on the falling-in of such English estates (about half the original quantity) as

confiscation had left to a family which in every Catholic rebellion from the days of my own Queen Mary to those of Charles Edward had given their blood like water and their lands like dust for the Stuarts. I assume that his Catholicism sat lightly upon a young man who in the age of Voltaire had enjoyed the personal friendship of Mirabeau; anyhow he had the sense to throw it to the dogs and enter the political life from which in those days it would have excluded him. He was (of course on the ultra-Liberal side) one of the most extreme politicians as well as one of the hardest riders and the best art patrons of his time. Take these instances: (1) He used to tell us that he and Lord Grey had by the law of the land repeatedly made themselves liable to be impeached and executed for high treason, and certainly I have read a speech of his on the Prince of Wales which, if delivered with reference to the present bearer of that title, would considerably astonish the existing House of Commons. (2) It was said that the two maddest things in the north country were his horse and himself, but I don't think the horse can have been the madder, or at least the harder to kill; for once when out shooting he happened to blow

away his right eye with a good bit of the skull, but was trepanned and lived to see his children's children (and a good many of them), and after more than ninety-eight years of health and strength to die quietly of a week's illness. We all naturally hoped to see him fill up his century, but the Fates said no. (3) He was the friend of the great Turner, of Mulready, and of many lesser artists; I wish to God he had discovered Blake, but that no man did till our own day—for the rest, he was most kind and affectionate to me always as child, boy, and youth. To the last he was far liker in appearance and manners to an old French nobleman (I have heard my mother remark it) than to any type of the average English gentleman.'

It is interesting to remark that Swinburne's father, Admiral Swinburne, was in his own way almost as remarkable as the grandfather. His ability showed itself in what the poet was strangely deficient—in mechanics. He spent much of his time in his carpenter's workshop. He invented more than one mechanical device for which he ought to have taken out a patent. I, myself, possess one of these devices, given to me by Lady Mary Gordon. It has always been a special wonder to visitors to The Pines.

No. II

These words about Little Nell shocked many Dickensians at the time of their appearance; and I fear they will continue to do so. They contrast strangely with Bret Harte's beautiful lines in 'Dickens in Camp':

'And then, while round them shadows gathered faster,
And as the fire-light fell,
He read aloud the book wherein the Master
Had writ of "Little Nell."'

May I, with all loyalty to Swinburne, say that it is necessary for a person to have had a much wider experience of life than he had to understand children educated by the great soul-widening schoolmistress Calamity.

However, as an antidote to Swinburne's remarks, we have only to remember his own noble sonnet, 'Dickens,' included in his finest volume, 'Tristram of Lyonesse, and other Poems' (1882), where Dickens as a delineator of children and old people is done full justice to:

'Chief in thy generation born of men
Whom English praise acclaimed as English-born,
With eyes that matched the worldwide eyes of
morn

For gleam of tears or laughter, tenderest then
When thoughts of children warmed their light, or
when

Reverence of age with love and labour worn,
Or godlike pity fired with godlike scorn,
Shot through them flame that winged thy swift live
pen :

Where stars and suns that we behold not burn,
Higher even than here, though highest was here
thy place,

Love sees thy spirit laugh and speak and shine
With Shakespeare and the soft bright soul of Sterne
And Fielding's kindest might and Goldsmith's
grace ;

Scarce one more loved or worthier love than
thine.'

No. III

This eloquent defence of both Dickens and Leigh Hunt came from Swinburne's heart. He frequently dwelt upon the subject. Two things impelled the poet to clear Dickens of the odious charge of satirising Leigh Hunt in the character of Harold Skimpole in 'Bleak House.' One was his admiration for Dickens; the other was his tenderness for the memory of Leigh Hunt. With regard to this versatile and winsome writer, there had always been a strong tie

between him and the Swinburne family, who had been among his warmest friends.

Swinburne's grandfather, Sir John Swinburne, visited him during his imprisonment, and to him Hunt dedicated, in 1818, his collection called 'Foliage.' Hunt had a much-loved son christened 'Swinburne,' the death of whom in childhood was the occasion of his writing one of his most beautiful letters. Perhaps it is worth while recording here that Shelley's friend of friends passed away a few hundred yards from The Pines, in the suburb where Swinburne lived so long.

THE END

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